

AWDS - Standing Up for Women Doctors

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Photos by Association of Women Doctors (Singapore)

Gender quota in medical school

A medical class filled with more female than male students. A residency programme with an equal number of male and female trainees. These are scenarios we take for granted these days.

Let us journey back through time to the 1980s and 1990s when most industries, including medicine and dentistry, had a gender quota. The rationale was that ladies would eventually get married, have babies and leave; hence it was deemed futile to invest in training the female workforce.

Even when I went for an interview in 2002 to secure a grant for my medical school fees, I was told that I should not be too "gung-ho" about doing medicine because eventually,

as per societal expectations, I would have to run the family and bear children, which may result in me leaving the workforce. The interview panel even persuaded me not to take up medicine. I still recall clearly my feelings of disbelief and dumbfoundedness.

Even meritocratic Singapore was not spared from the issues of gender inequality. The existence of many organisations under the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) tells the stories of the struggles faced and battles fought. One of such groups is the Association of Women Doctors (Singapore) (AWDS), an organisation that represents women doctors and dentists in Singapore.

Understanding the historical context behind the formation of

the AWDS will give us a better perspective of its current role and the future it can help build for our community.

Organisations to promote gender equity

Besides the AWDS, there are over 50 organisations under the SCWO, including the commonly featured organisation, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). SCWO was established in the 1980s as the national coordinating body of women's organisations in Singapore, at a time when gender inequity was prevalent. At a national and international level, it represents the Singapore female population on various pressing issues. As the medical fraternity, we are indeed honoured that the current president of SCWO is Dr June Goh, an



anaesthetist from SingHealth and an ex-president of the AWDS.

The birth of the AWDS

Realising that there was a lack of a platform for female medical professionals to gather and brainstorm on issues they faced, a group of women doctors got together to set up the AWDS. In July 1998, after over a year of discussions, the association was officially set up and registered. Dr Kanwaljit Soin, orthopaedic surgeon and the first female Nominated Member of Parliament; Dr Jennifer Lee, ex-chief executive officer of KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) during its transformation to a paediatric hospital; Dr Lucy Ooi, a social activist and advocate for the arts and mindfulness; and Dr Myra Elliot, dentist and maxillofacial surgeon active in global health, were the founding members of AWDS. Following which, dentist Dr Yeo Siang Khin, radiologist Dr Anne Tan Kendrick and paediatric neurologist A/Prof Choong Chew Thye, formed the backbone of the AWDS as its first core members.

Dr Yeo Siang Khin reminisces the association's humble beginnings: "The year was 1998 and I was a young mother looking to make new alliances with like-minded women dental and medical professionals. I walked into the KKH auditorium and next thing I knew, Dr Myra Elliot had put my name to be selected into the executive committee – and I was in. During those times, I was in charge of producing a newsletter and one must remember that during this early era, the dwindling twilight years of the nineties, many did not own mobile phones or even computers. Fortunately, I had access to an office computer, a printer and a Xerox machine in my dental clinic back then, and using a 'cut-and-paste' method, many newsletters were churned out that way, usually in the wee hours of the night."

AWDS started as a "go-to" centre for female doctors and medical

students, and eventually evolved to be the body that represents Singapore female doctors and dentists at a national and international level. Over time, its role expanded such that the expertise within AWDS was harnessed to benefit the community through collaborations, public education and fundraising events.

Lifting of the medical school gender quota

From 1979 to 2002, females were only conferred one-third of the places in the only medical school then – the National University of Singapore (NUS) Medical Faculty (now NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine). This led to "less qualified" male students being given a place instead of the "more qualified" female candidates. For many years, the core members of AWDS voiced their views against this practice of inequity, writing countless letters to the *Straits Times* and politicians.

Dr Anne Tan Kendrick looks back on this: "The AWDS committee was the backbone for me when I was president from 2000 to 2004 and fighting the gender quota. Kanwaljit and I flew to Japan to attend a conference held by the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. I drafted several letters to the *Straits Times* with their approval. We met and debated with several members of parliament."

AWDS conducted a survey and presented data showing that the attrition rates between male and female were similar. This was presented to the ministers with support from the Singapore Nurses Association and AWARE. After numerous dialogue sessions, the quota was finally lifted in 2002. Without this victorious battle, many of us may not be reading this article as SMA Members.

Community work, well-being and advocacy

Following this, AWDS expanded their work beyond advocating for doctors and dentists, to the community. In its early days, AWDS worked with

the Family Courts to have member doctors volunteer their services to help women filing for a Personal Protection Order (PPO) after being assaulted, saving them the trouble of visiting multiple places just to get a PPO. In appreciation, the Family Courts dedicated a plaque to AWDS on its Family Justice Tableau.

Dr Lucy Ooi, who was elated to find that the plaque still remains on a wall in the Family Court building at Havelock Road, recalls: "They gave us a clinic space adjacent to the Family Court, which at that time was at Paterson Road, where we provided medical services to examine women who were victims of violence. These were women who wanted PPOs. We would examine them and record their injuries and the stories they told us."

AWDS also runs fundraising events for various organisations, such as the NUS Medical Society Community Involvement Projects, Sanctuary House and Pledge It Forward. The myriad of talents among the AWDS members is a

“Through AWDS, we hope to inspire and motivate women doctors and women in general to do more for themselves and for the betterment of others. We would like to help reshape how women perceive themselves. To have gender equality, you first have to firmly believe and know that you are just as capable and deserving, if not much more so.”

– Dr Ho Ching Lin
President, AWDS

strong catalyst for such advocacy, fund raising and health-related public events.

Workshops are organised for both the public and healthcare professionals, with the aim of community engagement and empowerment. For example, together with the Dispatcher-Assisted first REsponder (DARE) programme, a basic CPR course was held for those from the SCWO, which was well received by the females and their spouses. Recognising that today's professional women face challenges managing the various "hats" they wear and responsibilities they hold, we also organised a series of signature talks in 2019 targeting at equipping working women with life skills that will be helpful to them.

Wellness is something that AWDS strongly advocates for as well. We have to be kind to ourselves – allowing us to feel rejuvenated to take care of our patients and family. Annually, besides the Christmas event, there are various events promoting personal well-being as we recognise that while always putting our patients and responsibilities first, self-care is often neglected by healthcare professionals.

Collaboration with other professions is unique and highly valued in AWDS. We frequently organise events in collaboration with other societies, such as the Singapore Association of Women Lawyers, where we get to meet and learn from dynamic women from various fields. One of the most powerful stories I have heard was from Dr Sudha Nair, a social worker and the founder of Centre for Promoting Alternatives to Violence. She shared with us some of the heart-wrenching stories of domestic abuse, which can be emotional rather than physical – such as the spouse who overly controls, is constantly suspicious and refuses to give his wife their house keys.

Our next big project, with the support of SCWO, is a book describing the biopsychosocial approach to women's health. We hope that this book will help to empower women and increase health literacy, and we



welcome anyone keen to contribute to it through AWDS.

Looking into the future

The challenges women face today are different and they come in various forms. To move forward as a meritocratic and successful society, we have to look out for each other. As the body representing women doctors, AWDS hopes to effectively address issues faced by doctors, dentists and the community. We also aim to help our members grow and develop in their areas of interest and expertise. Most importantly, we hope to impact the community through our various initiatives and collaboration with other organisations. ♦

Legend

1. Group photo taken with our guest speaker and founder, Dr Kanwaljit Soin, during our 20th Annual General Meeting in 2018
2. Past AWDS president, Dr Lucy Ooi, pointing to the plaque appreciating AWDS for their services at the Family Court

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Vision and Mission of the AWDS

"The Association of Women Doctors (Singapore) aims to enhance the professional development and well-being of its members in the medical and dental profession by providing a social platform for networking and communication. The society serves as a voice for women's health issues and an advocate for the advancement of women in practice. The society serves to provide information on career guidance and mentoring, and is also active in organising seminars, forums and workshops relating to health concerns, particularly those pertaining to women and families."



Please scan the QR code or visit <http://bit.ly/2Ph4hzq> to respond to a short survey by AWDS on the issues female doctors face and how the association can help.

To find out more about the AWDS and their work, visit <https://www.awds.org.sg>.